The Seventh Christmas

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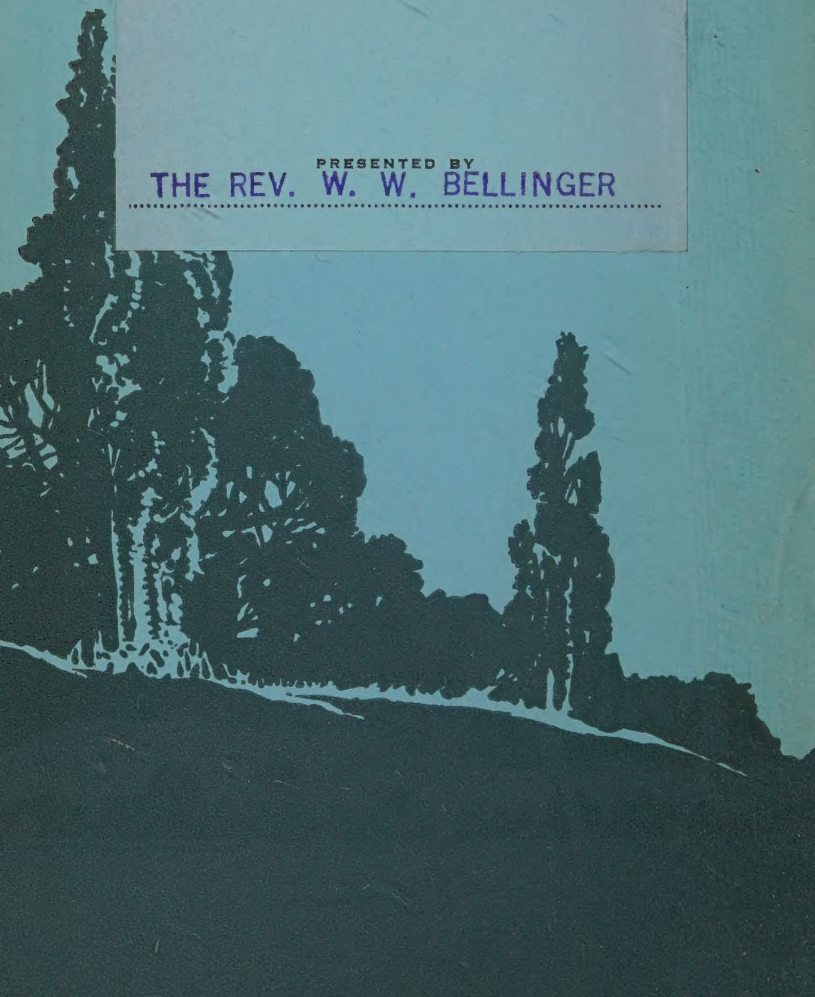

Herbert
Dehaus
Williams

THE SEVENTH CHRISTMAS

BY

CONINGSBY DAWSON

Author of "Carry On," "Slaves of Freedom," "The Raft," "The Garden Without Walls," etc.

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I

IT was the Seventh Christmas. In the village of Nazareth, which some say means "Flowery," all the children save one had wakened that morning quite unexcited and without any hope of presents. Grown people had gone as usual about their daily work. All the shops were open. No one felt any kinder than was ordinary. No one said, "Seven years ago today Jesus was born in Bethlehem." No one had forgiven his enemy, for it was not over Nazareth that the angels

had sung "Peace, good-will toward men." Had you wandered down that quiet village street, where no snow had fallen and no windows were decorated with holly, where sandal-footed girls were coming out from houses balancing pitchers on their heads, you would never have guessed that it was the morning of the Seventh Christmas.

Even in the carpenter's cottage, where the little Jesus dwelt, his father and mother seemed to have forgotten. And perhaps his father had, for bread was hard to earn. But his mother, though she did not show it, had remembered. On this day, of all days, she pondered in her heart the wonders that had been foretold about her son at his birth. On this day, of all days, she watched for the angels

to return. But the wonders were long in commencing, and had she told to any of her neighbors the miracle that had happened at Bethlehem, they would have thought it an idle tale she had invented.

Though she had remembered that it was Jesus' birthday, she was ashamed to own it, for she had no present for him and scarcely any food in the house. So, when the one child in Nazareth, the only child in all the world who knew that it was Christmas, had awakened that morning, it had seemed to him that the world did not care. At first he was disappointed; but when he saw the trouble in his mother's eyes, he sang to make her glad.

Before the day was ended something was sure to happen; something

unexpected always did happen on his birthdays. Two years ago a shepherd had come all the way from Bethlehem, a four days' journey, carrying a lamb in his bosom. Still longer ago, before he could remember, some one had given him three golden caskets. His mother took care of them; she had never let him see inside them, and she had never told him their story. His father, Joseph, had been offered much money for them; but though they were poor, his mother had always refused to sell.

All day he had waited for the unexpected to occur. As he helped his father at the carpenter's bench, he watched his mother seated in the doorway, clad in her striped robe and wrapped in a white linen shawl

as in a shroud. Every time a camel-train shuffled by, stirring up the dust on the road to Damascus, he could hear the coins jingle on her forehead. She, too, was waiting—for what, he wondered.

The day dragged on. There was no midday meal. His seventh birthday, and no one had remembered! What did the birthday of a little boy matter when times were so hard in Nazareth? It was winter; flowers had perished from the fields; brooks were white with dashing water; a bleak look was over everything, and work was scarce. Younger carpenters were always passing down to the coast-towns with the caravans; they were glad to ply their trade for the smallest hire. Joseph could not compete with them. He could no longer

stoop for his tools or move quickly. If no one was at hand to remember for him, he would often make mistakes in his measurements; then all the materials that he had worked upon were wasted. So Mary used to send the little Jesus with Joseph when people wanted to give him orders for doors, and milk-pails, and beds, and chests. But because he was so often in error, they wanted him less frequently; when they did, they beat him down in price, because he was infirm.

"Ah, friend Joseph," they would say, "thou wast once a good carpenter before thou didst journey into Egypt. The hot roads robbed thee of thy strength. If thou hadst only stayed in Nazareth——"

As Joseph turned away, the little

Jesus would look up into his dim eyes and question, "Why didst thou not stay in Nazareth, father?"

And his father would reply, as though defending himself, "It was for thy sake that I went."

"And did I go with thee? And was it there that they did give me the golden caskets?"

But the old man would shake his head. "Perchance it was a dream. When thou art a man thou mightest laugh at me if to-day I were to tell."

Because Joseph was so old, there were times when he would fall asleep over his work; he gave the little Jesus orders always to stay near him to awake him. Then Jesus would try to bring comfort, saying, "I will grow up quickly, father; when I am

a man thou shalt rest." But his mother, who was young and more beautiful than any of the mothers of Nazareth, would show fear at his words and clasp him to her, whispering, "Nay, little son, thou shalt be a child for long years yet."

So it had gone on, and as Joseph's strength had failed him they had grown poorer till now, on the Seventh Christmas, there was no food left in the carpenter's house. All day Joseph had toiled ceaselessly and Jesus had done his best to help, that the ox-yoke might be finished by evening and they might have the money to buy bread. All day Mary had sat in the doorway gazing up and down the sunlit village street, listening and watching. At times she would turn her eyes into the shop

and ask a question: "And they sang 'Glory in the highest,' so the shepherds said. Was it not so, Joseph?"

"It was so, if we did not dream it."

He answered as one who was sure of nothing; as he bent his head, his white beard caught up the chips that lay upon the bench.

"But the gifts from the East—the golden caskets; they are proofs. We still have them."

"Aye. They are worth a king's ransom. Merchants going down to Damascus would purchase. I am very weary, Mary. Wilt thou not consent? If we were to sell——"

Her eyes rested on him sorrowfully—the soft, dark eyes of a woman who had lived always in loneliness. "A king's ransom! And shall we

sell the ransom of our King without his knowing?"

She turned her gaze back to the village street, still desperately hoping. He should be great. He should rule over nations and sit upon the throne of David. That was what angels, shepherds, rich strangers had declared in Bethlehem on the night of his birth. Since that first Christmas there had been no more signs or portents—only escapes, long journeys and uneventful poverty. It was as though with his birth the clouds had sealed up the stairway to the heavens and God had forgotten. No wonder Joseph was half persuaded that all the prophecies had been imagined. To the three golden caskets Mary's faith clung. At any moment royal messengers might

come riding from Jerusalem to take her son away and crown him. Far down the road through bare olive-groves, she would see the smoke of their chariots. She had the little robe ready, which she had worked for him secretly in silk and silver thread. But if they were to come and the caskets were sold, how would they know that Jesus was the king for whom they were seeking?

And yet Joseph was weak for want of bread. With the money that merchants would give them for the caskets they might live all their lives in plenty.

Seeing that his parents' hearts were troubled, again the little Jesus sang, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." From gray hillsides, where shepherds sat among their

flocks, the bleating of sheep answered. Women passing by to draw water at the well and lean camel-drivers of a halted caravan paused to stare in at the carpenter's shop, arrested by the boy's clear singing. Their glances traveled from Jesus to his mother. "Blessed art thou among women," their eyes said. Then Mary felt rich, though she was hungry and had given her son no present.

As the day faded and shadows lengthened, boys gathered about the doorway, crying to Jesus to come out among the cypresses and play at "kings" with them. He smiled gravely and shook his head. As they went away, he followed their voices out past the threshing-floor to the wide, sweet silences where brooks babbled, and in summer-time the

country was golden with oranges and silver with the quivering leaves of olives. There, had he gone with them, they would have spread their sheepskin coats for a throne and he would have sung to them. They would have plaited a crown and set it on his head as though he had been Herod. He would have molded sparrows out of clay for them, so like to life that it seemed he had but to toss them in the air for them to spread their wings and vanish. When evening was a blue smoke blown among the sheepfolds and lights were twinkling in windows of Nazareth, they would have brought him back, riding on their shoulders and shouting before him. But the ox-yoke was not yet finished. Their voices died out in the distance.

"I am too old. I cannot."

The tools fell from Joseph's hands. For a moment he swayed above the carpenter's bench; then, gathering his cloak before his face, he slipped to the bed of shavings that strewed the floor and slept.

"Thou must wake him as he did bid thee," Mary whispered.

Jesus bent over him. "He is weary. Would that I were a man; then would I finish the yoke myself."

"But thou art still a child, and there is no bread in the house. Thou must wake him."

Jesus stood up and spread abroad his arms; the shadow of the cross fell behind him. Mary covered her eyes with her hands. Jesus ran to her and threw his arms about her. "See, I

will sit beside thee and protect thee; but he shall rest. Hadst thou forgotten, mother?—this day I am seven and nearly a man."

"Little one, I had not forgotten; but all day my heart hath ached for thee. I have nothing that I can give thee. I had hoped that thou hadst not remembered."

He laid his face against her breast. The memory of the cross faded. Again he was the tiny babe with whom she had fled into strange countries, seeing nothing of the perils that beset her because of the hopes she had had.

Once more beneath the sunset she cast her eyes along the road, watching for the smoking wheels of chariots. The road was empty; the heavens silent. No sign save the cross

had been vouchsafed to her of the promised splendors.

Slowly, like sheep following into a meadow, the stars came out. One by one, in windows of the village street, lights were extinguished. The closing of doors and rustling of lowered curtains were heard. The chill of the Eastern December night crept into the air. In the darkness, at the back of the carpenter's shop, Joseph slept. It seemed in that shuttered world that of all those faithful ones who had greeted the babe at Bethlehem she alone was left to worship. They had given him gold and frankincense then; but now——

Did he slumber? She glanced down; through the dusk his eyes were gazing up at her. She remembered her own girlhood and the ex-

citement of her birthdays. He should not be disappointed. She must give him something; but what, when she was so poor that she could not even give him bread?

II

"ART thou sleepy?" He shook his head against his mother's breast. He had been listening to the bleating of the sheep; it was like waves beating among the misty hills. Far beyond white walls of the village, as far as eyes could reach, he could see the blur of sheep-folds, the glow of camp-fires and the shadowy outlines of watchful figures standing crook in hand beneath the stars. He was thinking of the song that had been with him all day, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Lest he should feel the cold, his mother drew him closer, spread-

ing her linen shawl about him like a tent.

"When thou playest at 'kings' with the village boys, thou art always the King—is it not so?" she whispered. "I will tell thee the story of a king who was born on the same day as thou wast."

"Then today will be his birthday?"

She smiled in the darkness. "Today he, too, is seven. It is a very marvelous story."

"A true story?"

"A true story, but so marvelous that thou mightest not believe it, were it not I who told thee."

Jesus remembered Joseph's words, "When thou art a man thou mightest laugh at me if today I were to tell thee." He sat very breathless,

for he knew that now he was to learn why his father had taken that long journey into Egypt. And he thought that if he listened intently he might learn whence had come the mysterious golden caskets, which his mother would not sell though much money had been offered.

"I, Mary, knew the mother of this King." Her lips trembled against his cheek and her voice came tenderly. "Doth it seem strange to thee, little Jesus, that thy mother should have known the mother of a King? Every morning and evening with the village girls she would go to draw water at the well. As she went down the street with her empty pitcher, she had to pass a carpenter's shop. The carpenter would pause in his work to smile up at her; some-

times, when she was returning, he would lay aside his tools and step out to gaze after her. There came a day when he took the pitcher from her hand. 'It is too heavy for thee,' he said. After that, whenever he saw her returning, he would carry the brimming pitcher for her. But this, all this was before the King's coming and is not what I meant to tell thee."

She ceased; in the quiet of her heart she was dreaming to herself that part of the story.

"One evening," she said, "when the air was sweet with flowers, she was sitting alone in her garden. In the stillness she heard a rush of wings, like to the sound of swallows darting. With the sound of wings came a light that was dazzling. When she looked up, standing in the

path before her was an angel who had been sent to her from God."

Jesus pressed against her eagerly. "And did he tell her aught of the golden caskets?"

Mary laughed gently. Remembering had made her happy, so that she had forgotten her poverty. Stooping, she kissed the uplifted face. "Nay, be patient. The golden caskets come later. He told her that she should be the mother of a King and that among women she should be called blessed; for the King when he came should be the son of God, and should bring love into the world."

"To be the mother of a King must be very blessed." The little boy spoke gravely. "And after that, mother, what did he tell her?"

"Spreading his wings, he flew away till the flash of his going grew faint above the palm-trees in the gold of the sunset. Next morning the carpenter watched for her to pass; when she did not go to draw water at the well, he came in search of her. She was still sitting where the angel had left her, gazing straight before her; for, as thou sayest, to be the mother of a King is very blessed, but it is very terrible to be the mother of the son of God. Then the carpenter asked her why she had not been to draw water. Now, though he was a good man, he had never seen an angel; and so, when she told him——"

Behind, in the darkness, Joseph stirred. "I cannot," he muttered; "I cannot." In his dreams he was

still troubled because the ox-yoke was unfinished. Through the shadows Mary spoke to him. Sighing like a child, he ceased from his muttering and slept peaceably.

"And because he had never seen an angel?" Jesus questioned.

Mary turned back from gazing into the dimness of the shop. "Because he was a good man, he came to understand at last. Through the summer, while the oranges were yellowing, they lived very happily. In the evenings, in the garden where the angel had appeared to her, the carpenter carved a royal cradle, with cherubim upon it, and she wove robes in preparation for the King's coming. It was in the winter, just before he was expected, that a decree went out from Cæsar Augustus that

all the world should go, every one to his own city, to be taxed. Having closed his shop, the carpenter bought an ass and set the mother of the unborn King upon it."

"Was it not a camel, mother, all covered with gold and purple, such as princes from far countries ride when they pass through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus?"

She bowed her head. It was the question she herself would have asked. "It is a true story," she whispered, "and very marvelous—more marvelous as it goes on. The mother of God's son set out riding on an ass and the carpenter walked beside her with his staff. Roads were thronged with merchants and soldiers and caravans—with people traveling like the carpenter, every one to his own city,

to be taxed. As the mother of God's son passed, no one noticed her. Men in the fields did not look up from their ploughing. Often the carpenter would have to draw the ass aside, lest she should be splashed by the wheels of a chariot. She watched them all; she had never known that there were so many people in the world. 'All these my son shall rule,' she thought.

"Through the rose gardens of Jericho she traveled, till on the fourth day, as the sun was setting, Jerusalem blazed up like a golden temple. 'It is here that he will come to be crowned,' she thought; 'perchance it is here he will be born.'

"But Jerusalem was crowded and the carpenter had kinsfolk in Bethlehem, which was but a six miles' jour-

ney; so, though she was weary and the ass stumbled in his steps and the carpenter's feet were sore, they left the domes of Jerusalem behind them and hurried on."

Mary sighed at the remembered pain of that Hebron road, the jolting of the rough track through the mountains and the forlornness of her thoughts.

Jesus lifted up his arms, drawing down his mother's face to him. Thus they sat in silence. "Had I been there, I would have helped thee," he said at last.

"Thou!" She peered into his eyes, frightened by his quietness. "Little Jesus, thou hast guessed?"

It was as though, beneath the gay seriousness of his childishness, he had always known that he was the

son of God. The earthly mother in her shrank from the thought, as she had shrunk from the shadow of the cross. It made him too little hers in making him so largely God's.

"There is much that thou canst not understand," she faltered. "Some day, when thou art older——"

"Yet tell me," he pleaded. "Am I not nearly a man? Today I am seven."

"Yea, today thou art seven and I have no present for thee; therefore I will tell thee. It was growing dark as we climbed up to Bethlehem; far away in the clouds, like a white palace hewn from the moonlight, it shone. Every window was illumined and all along the road we met travelers turning back. 'There is no room,' they called to us, 'no room.'

But Joseph pressed forward, for he had kinsfolk living there; he thought they would take pity on my necessity. We came to the last ascent and the gateway; we entered. He went from door to door, inquiring for shelter, that I might find rest. His kinsfolk and friends with one accord began to make excuses: 'If we had but known of thy coming: if thou hadst but arrived earlier.' Even at the inn there was no place left for us. When my strength was gone, hard by the courtyard of the inn we found a cave in the rocks, where cattle were stalled. The kindly beasts made way for us and there, on such a starry night as this is, thou—thou who shalt be ruler over all the world, wast born."

He raised himself in her lap, lean-

ing against her breast and turning her face toward him. "Dost thou believe it?"

Again the question that oppressed her heart! "Why dost thou ask?"

His child's eyes reached up to hers through the dark. "Because we are poor."

"I was poor then." Her voice broke and sank. "I was Mary of Nazareth as I am now. Ah, but I believed it, for there were signs, and portents, and wonders in the heavens! Yea, and I still believe it. Have I not treasured all these memories in my heart? I wrapped thee in swaddling clothes and laid thee in a manger because there was no room for thee in the abodes of men—no room for the son of God! Come near to me, little Jesus. When I hold

thee so I can still believe that I, Mary of Nazareth, am rich and blessed. For seven long years, as many years as thou art, I have kept silent; but now I will tell thee.

"There were shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks that night. Dost thou remember how one of them came to Nazareth, a four days' journey, bringing thee a lamb in his arms? And lo, as they watched their flock, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not. For, behold I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all nations. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour

which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.'

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.' And they came with haste and found thee lying in the manger.

"Scarcely had they departed when a great clamor of trumpets rose upon the night, and the sound of men

beating upon doors and demanding, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship.'

"So Joseph stepped out from the cave among the rocks and looked down into the courtyard. There he saw a train of camels, caparisoned in gold and purple, like to the camels on which princes ride when they go through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus. And from all their necks hung bells that tinkled, and the men who sat upon them waved torches. So great was the company that it spread like a river beneath the city gate and far down the hill. At the head of it rode three kings with shining crowns, and their servants beat upon the doors and shouted, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews?

We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship.'

"Then the householders rose from sleep and looked out from their windows. 'There hath been no king in Bethlehem, my lords, since David.'

"And the master of the inn opened his door, lest his guests should be disturbed and made angry. 'No king hath been born in Bethlehem,' he said, 'but, perchance, in Jerusalem it may have happened.'

"Then the three lords lifted up their arms and pointed. 'It hath led us from the East,' they chanted; 'for many nights it hath moved before us.'

"And while they yet spake, a star was let down from heaven and came to rest like a lantern above the cave where thou wast lying.

"'It is naught but a hole in the rocks where beasts are stalled,' said the innkeeper.

"But when the three kings saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy and made haste to descend from their camels. And when they were come into the cave and saw thee lying in my arms as I sat among the oxen, they fell on their faces and worshipped.

"'My lords, whence are ye come to me?' I asked.

"Then they uncovered their faces. And I saw that one was a boy, smooth of face and ruddy of countenance. And one was a man in the power of his strength, tanned by the desert and black-bearded. One was white as snow, with eyes that blazed like fires, and so old that his voice

was like a reed shaken. And it was he who answered.

"'Mother of mothers, from the East have we journeyed and all the gods of Persia have called thee blessed. Long have we waited for thy son to be born, for our prophet, Zoroaster, foretold his coming; and we have a book, which bears the name of Seth the son of Adam, wherein all things are written concerning the star. And in the land of Persia we have a temple, in which are kept the images of our gods and goddesses. On the night on which the star, long awaited, appeared, all our gods and goddesses were heard talking together; in the morning when we entered the temple, all the images were fallen on their faces. Then we rode forth, following the

star. Hither we have come bearing presents.'

"Then three slaves appeared, each standing behind his lord and bearing in his arms a golden casket. And the oldest lord took from his slave his casket and lifted therefrom a crown, which he set upon thy forehead, saying, 'This crown I give unto thee for Power. The gold whereof it is made consisteth of thirty pieces, which were a funeral offering unto Adam. It was carried with his body in the Ark, and afterward was coined by Terah. It was for these pieces, also, that Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brethren. Next they were paid as tribute unto Pharaoh and with them Joseph bought from Sheba the perfumes for the body of his father, Jacob. In

after times the Queen of Sheba made a present of them unto Solomon, and so they remained at Jerusalem till Israel was carried captive into Babylon. Now that thou art come, the East yields them back to thee.'

"Then the second lord, who was black-bearded, took from his slave his casket; and when he had opened it there stole forth a sweet fragrance. 'This frankincense,' he said, and his voice was like a strong wind blowing, 'the East yields unto thee for worship.'

"Then the third lord, who was smooth of face, with the foreboding of youth in his eyes, took tremblingly from the hands of his slave his casket, and his voice was like the weeping of a woman."

Mary fell silent. Slowly, one by

one, her tears crept down till they fell upon the face of Jesus.

"Mother, tell me—nay, mother, thou didst promise."

"'From the East,' he said, 'I bring thee myrrh, which signifieth Death—a gift to every man of woman born.'

"Then they each one took thee in their arms and gazed very wonderingly. On account of the smallness of my means, I gave unto them one of thy swaddling-bands, which those great lords received with every mark of reverence. And when they had bidden thee farewell, they would not go into the inn because it had refused to give thee shelter; but they tethered their camels in the courtyard and they raised their tents beneath the stars. While they slept, an

angel appeared unto them, saying, 'Get thee up, and depart swiftly another way.' So they arose and set out for the ships at Tarshish; by morning they were gone. And the same angel spake unto Joseph in a dream, 'Arise. Take the young child and escape into Egypt; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.'

"And we straightway fled, taking with us the golden caskets. As we hurried along, I riding on the ass and Joseph walking with his staff, soldiers came marching from Jerusalem and entered into Bethlehem, inquiring diligently for a holy child which had been born. And when they found thee not, they put all the children that were in Bethlehem to the sword. From the white city on

the mountain height a cry went up—women weeping for their children, who would not be comforted because they were not.

"In Egypt work was hard to find; the roads were hot and Joseph grew old through poverty. Homesickness came upon us for Nazareth, for its olive-groves, its sheepfolds and its shadowy twilights. Then word came to us that Herod was dead and that Archelaus reigned in the room of his father. So we returned to the carpenter's shop, with naught left to us of all these glories save only the golden caskets. The rest—the rest thou knowest."

III

FROM behind them the breathing of Joseph came softly. Upon the face of Jesus the tears of Mary fell.

He sat as one entranced, awestruck and smiling, thinking of the three great Persian lords, and of the many camels which were like a river, and of the waving torches. Whither had they sailed in the ships from Tarshish, and had the star, which was like a lantern, still gone before them? Then he thought of Herod, and of the old age that Egypt had brought upon Joseph.

"I was so small; wherefore did he wish to kill me?"

"Because of the question that the lords had asked, calling thee the King of the Jews."

"It is the game at which I play with the village boys. Mother, but am I——?"

She pressed her lips against his to silence them. "Thou art a child, the son of Mary. Herod was not good; he feared lest God should wrest his throne from him."

Jesus laughed, holding up his hands in the moonlight and spreading wide his fingers.

Mary took his hands and bent over him. "Why dost thou laugh?"

"Because they are so small; yet thou sayest that he feared them. Archelaus is King of the Jews, while

I lack bread. Mother, dost thou think that when I am a man I shall wrest his throne from him?"

"Hush!" She clutched him to her. "Say no more. Say nothing of what I have told thee. If any should have heard thee—— Thou art young. Think no more of it. Let it be as a dream that thou wilt forget shortly."

"But it was no dream. Thou didst say it was no dream."

"Nay, it was no dream," she whispered.

A true story! He sat in thought. He, who wore a sheepskin coat and helped in the carpenter's shop and went about with Joseph remembering his measurements—he was the son of God.

"It is my seventh birthday," he

said; "let me look into the golden caskets."

In the barrenness of the present, her heart cried out for such a confirmation of the glories that were past. Rising, she entered the shop on tiptoe for fear of waking Joseph. From the place where she had hidden them in readiness for the arrival of charioteers and horsemen who should summon her son to his crowning, she brought them forth; with them she brought the royal robe that she had woven. In the shuttered street, with nothing stirring save the distant flocks and none to watch her save the stars, she put the robe upon him. When, looking down at the kingly shadow that he cast, his eyes danced with gladness and he clapped his hands childishly, she caught his

excitement. How often she had longed to array him in these splendors! Surely tonight, late though it was, some sign would come to tell her that God's angels still kept guard. Tremblingly opening the first casket, she drew forth the crown and set it shining on his forehead. "It is for Power," she said. From the second she drew forth the frankincense and scattered it upon his raiment. "It is for Worship." But the third casket, containing the gift which signifieth Death, she did not open.

As she watched him on the threshold of the carpenter's shop, palely attired, with the moonlight throwing a halo round him, the sorrow of her long waiting was forgotten. Her thoughts fled back to the garden of her girlhood and the angel who had

come to her out of the sunset. It was enough, though all the world was careless, that she was left faithful. Falling on her knees, with her arms about him, she sang whisperingly the hymn of her thankfulness: "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things—hath done to me great things——"

Her faith stumbled; suddenly she remembered that her child was hungry—her child, whom she shared with God. Then, because he was smiling, she took new courage, "and holy is his name."

She had sung thus far when Jesus held up his hand, listening and saying nothing. At first she thought he had heard Joseph stirring; the

sound of a man sleeping still fell gently. She turned her head, supposing that in the street he had seen some one coming. Then she, too, heard it—the thud-thud-thudding of a swiftly approaching camel and a voice which panted on the night, "Where is he?—Where is he?" The question got no farther, for the breath of the rider came sobbingly.

Through olive-groves, bare of leaves, a dromedary came racing, swaying and staggering from weariness. It was the kind that princes ride, when they pass through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus; but it came unfollowed and solitary. From its neck hung a silver bell which tinkled. It was caparisoned in purple and gold; but the purple had faded and the gold was tar-

nished. Upon it sat a man, gaunt and haggard, whose raiment was gray with the dust of travel. He leant peering forward; his throat was parched, so that at times when his lips moved he uttered nothing.

Urging his beast, he rode past the threshing-floor and commenced the ascent into Nazareth. Between shuttered houses, casting his eyes from side to side, he whispered as he approached, "Where is he?—Where is he?" As though he had been the survivor of a lost army, the memory of defeat clung upon him.

Kneeling beside Jesus, Mary watched. All day she had waited for ambassadors and lordly caravans, for a repetition of that first miraculous Christmas; now, while the world slept, came this lonely man, fleeing

through the night like a shadow. He seemed half blind. He would have gone by the carpenter's shop, but Mary rose to her feet. He halted.

"Where is he who is born King of the Jews?" he questioned hoarsely. "Once, when I was young, on such a night as this I found him. To-night there are many stars, but no star to guide me."

She came out from the shadow and stared up into the face of the stranger. "Whence art thou?"

Bending down from his dromedary, he gazed at her puzzled, as though she brought memories. "From the East," he whispered; his voice was like the sound of a woman sobbing. "We had waited so long, I who was young, and Melchior who

was old, and Balthazar who was midway between us. At last we found him, and all the gods of Persia fell upon their faces and called him blessed. Again we have waited. We have lost him, and the East grows doubting; for the world hath not changed from what it was. It seems a dream—all that we thought once happened. Melchior is dying; he longs for certainty. So without a star to guide me, because my faith is greatest, I, who am the youngest of we three kings, have journeyed forth. Where is he who is born King of the Jews? If thou canst tell me, I will give thee—— But I can give thee nothing, for I have spent my all in the searching. Out of kindness canst thou tell me?"

Mary turned her head, glancing

back across her shoulder. The gaze of the youngest lord followed. Gropingly he descended. His eyes met the eyes of the child. In the moonlight he saw the crown which shone upon his forehead, the white robe which garbed him, and the three golden caskets, two of them open, which lay at his feet before him. The fragrance of frankincense stole upon the air, making the night a temple.

"It is true. It is true. It was no dream."

Running forward he would have bowed himself in worship, but something stopped him. Was it his own loneliness, or the loneliness of the childish kingly figure? Instead, he took him in his arms.

"I came to thee before with a

lordly train and trumpets blowing," he whispered; "now I come to thee stained with the dust of travel and empty-handed. What is there I can give thee?"

Jesus stroked the haggard face. "It is my seventh birthday, and my mother is hungry."

From about his waist the lord unloosed a pouch in which were bread and dates. Sitting in the doorway of the carpenter's shop, he spread them out before Jesus and his mother.

"Were I in my own country," he said, "I would give thee a palace of white marble, with fountains playing and hanging gardens and slaves to serve thee. Here I am poor; but such as I have I give thee."

When the meal was ended they

talked, and Jesus laughed and sang to them; but always softly for fear of disturbing Joseph. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." And he taught his song to the young lord that when he returned to his own people he might say, "It is thus that the little Jesus singeth."

The night wore on. The Persian lord would have stayed till morning for the delight he had in holding the son of Mary. But Mary reminded him, "Melchior is old and dying. It is a long journey. What can we send to him to make him certain?"

Then they thought of the crown; but he himself had given it and might be offended. And they thought of the frankincense; but that was all gone. There was nothing in the shop to send him save the carpenter's

tools, which would prove nothing; moreover, Joseph would need them for finishing the ox-yoke in the morning.

The child spoke, "Let us send him the third casket, for it hath not been opened."

"Nay," said Mary, for she knew what it contained: myrrh, which signifieth Death—a gift to every man of woman born.

But Jesus freed himself from the arms of the young lord and brought it to him. "I will open it," he said, "and look just once, for it was thy gift to me."

When he raised the lid, a dazzling light burst forth, so that all save Jesus was blinded. But Jesus clapped his hands and laughed, for instead of the gift which signifieth Death, out

from the casket drifted the star. When the Persian lord saw it floating up into the heavens, he fell on his knees and worshipped.

"The star which we had lost!" he cried. "The star which we had lost!"

Halting above the carpenter's shop, dimming even the moon by the brightness of its shining, it waited for him to follow.

Holding the hand of Jesus, Mary stood gazing down the village street, watching him depart. Directly he was mounted, the star moved eastward toward the dawn, going to bring faith to the dying eyes of Melchior. Only once, when at the point of vanishing the Persian lord drew up to wave his hand, did it stay its march across the heavens.

When the thudding of the dromedary had died out in the olive-groves, they returned to the doorway of the carpenter's shop. As they sat there in the grayness of the morning, Mary slumbered and the little Jesus drew her robe about her to keep her warm. Then he took the crown from off his forehead and set it back in its casket. And he took off his kingly garment and put on his sheepskin jacket; for he knew that soon the people of Nazareth would be stirring and they would wonder to see him thus appareled. And he said to himself, "I am nearly a man. Am I not seven?" So he did what he had never done before—he took Joseph's tools and he worked upon the ox-yoke.

Now when Mary wakened and remembered, she thought she had been

dreaming. But when she searched for the third casket, which had contained the gift that signifieth Death, it was gone.

While she was still troubled in her spirit, Joseph awoke, uttering a glad cry, and called her to him. By the bench she found him marveling, for the ox-yoke was finished and the little Jesus lay asleep on the shavings in the corner.

Bending over the childish hands, she saw that they were blistered with toil for her. Then she fell to smiling and weeping. "Of a truth," she whispered, "he is the son of God."

THE END

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Dawson, C. W.

The seventh Christmas

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